

# is your period a problem?

From killer cramps to strange cycles, when to worry and when to go with the flow.

BY CHRISTINE BROPHY

The first time you bleed really heavily can be scary. As can missing your period or getting it too often. Maybe you've tried every way you know to ease bloating or painful cramps, but the symptoms just keep coming back. Besides being inconvenient or uncomfortable, menstrual changes can sometimes signal a more serious health problem, like uterine tumors or an infection. Here, Alyssa Dweck, M.D., assistant clinical professor at Mount Sinai School of Medicine in New York, gives the lowdown on common period problems.

**Q** LATELY MY PERIODS HAVE GOTTEN VERY HEAVY AND I'M HAVING BAD CRAMPS. SHOULD I BE CONCERNED?

Possibly. If your period changes drastically and you are soaking through two pads or two super tampons every hour, and if the pain is so horrible that it's preventing you from going about your usual activities, see your gynecologist. She may recommend relieving menstrual pain with birth control pills, pain relievers containing ibuprofen, or

a heating pad. Sometimes irregular bleeding and pain can be a signal of endometriosis. The condition develops when uterine tissues grow in other areas of the pelvis such as the fallopian tubes or ovaries. It can strike as early as a woman's 20s and, if left untreated, lead to infertility. If you report pain and irregular bleeding to your doctor, she may immediately suspect endometriosis. Sometimes a doctor can detect the condition during a pelvic exam, too. The diagnosis is then confirmed with a surgical procedure using a laparoscope. Hormone therapy and pain medications are often prescribed. But surgery might be the best option for women with severe symptoms or those having problems conceiving.

Heavy bleeding and pain may also be caused by uterine fibroids, growths or tumors that appear on or in the uterine wall. Most often they are not cancerous, but they can be problematic if they grow too large or if there are too many of them. Usually a doctor can detect fibroids during a pelvic exam. To confirm this diagnosis, a doctor may

perform an exam using ultrasound, MRI or computed tomography. Typically fibroids occur in a woman's late 20s to mid to late 40s. If symptoms are mild and you don't intend to get pregnant, you may be prescribed anti-inflammatory drugs for pain and hormones to help reduce the bleeding or pain. Fibroid removal (or myomectomy) is an option for those planning to have children. For other women, there's a procedure called uterine artery embolization, which involves blocking the tumor's blood supply to stop its growth. In the most serious cases, a hysterectomy may be necessary.

**Q** I'M THINKING ABOUT SWITCHING TO A TYPE OF BIRTH CONTROL PILL THAT ELIMINATES MY PERIOD. BUT IS NOT MENSTRUATING BAD FOR ME?

Women shouldn't try to completely get rid of their period. But Seasonale, a birth control pill that eliminates a woman's period for all but four cycles a year, appears to be perfectly safe. In fact, gynecologists have long prevented menstruation in a similar (albeit off-label) way in women who wanted to avoid getting their period during their honeymoon or vacation, for instance. Instead of three weeks of hormones and one week of placebo pills, the doctor would recommend skipping the placebo pills, resulting in a missed period. However, only certain types of birth control pills work for this method. As an added benefit, birth control pills can prevent premenstrual symptoms and anemia, and reduce the risk of ovarian and uterine cancers.

**Q** I'VE MISSED SEVERAL PERIODS LATELY. SINCE I'M NOT PREGNANT, WHAT COULD BE GOING ON?

If you haven't gotten your period for more than three consecutive months, see your doctor, who can double-check that you indeed aren't pregnant. Talk to her

about any changes in your life, since stress or extreme exercise or diet habits can also affect menstruation. Hormonal changes, such as those that occur in premature menopause or in a condition called polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS), can cause women to skip their period. Women with PCOS have cysts on their ovaries and a hormone imbalance that can cause high levels of androgen, a hormone that is higher in men than women. Other symptoms of PCOS include weight gain, facial hair, partial balding, infertility, insulin resistance, diabetes and acne. If you have this condition, you may be prescribed birth control pills to regulate hormones, metformin for insulin resistance, clomiphene to stimulate ovulation (for infertility) and spironolactone to lower high androgen levels and treat excess hair growth.

**Q EVERY MONTH, RIGHT AROUND THE START OF MY PERIOD, I GET TERRIBLE MIGRAINES. WHAT CAN I DO?**

Menstrual migraines are not that uncommon. Thirteen million women get them, says the National Headache Foundation. Sixty percent of women who suffer from migraines say that they have an increase in headaches around their period, and up to 14 percent of female migraine sufferers get migraines *only* around their period, according to the American Council for Headache Education. Women get menstrual migraines anywhere from two days before their period to the last day of menstruation. Experts suspect that these headaches are triggered by a drop in estrogen and progesterone. One way to prevent these headaches is by preloading with over-the-counter or prescription pain relievers, such as ibuprofen, naproxen or Excedrin Migraine (which is a combination of aspirin, acetaminophen and caffeine), generally a day or two before you usually get a migraine. Birth control pills or estradiol tablets (estrogen) may also help relieve severe migraines. However, some women who suffer from migraines regularly may have worse headaches when taking birth control pills. If you experience severe menstrual migraines, your doctor may refer you to a neurologist to rule out an underlying medical condition. Some migraines can be prevented or minimized by identifying and avoiding food, environmental or behav-

ioral triggers that precede a migraine. Common triggers include red wine, chocolate and dehydration.

**Q WHAT CAN I DO TO PREVENT THE BLOATED FEELING I GET EVERY MONTH BEFORE MY PERIOD?**

Hide the salt shaker and skip the Chinese takeout; excess sodium causes your body to retain even more water than usual. Exercise can help you get rid of some of the water weight. Increasing your intake of natural diuretics like asparagus and grapefruit juice can also help. Ask your doctor if you need a prescription diuretic to take right before

of a pelvic infection are fever, abdominal pain and white, gray or yellow puslike vaginal discharge with a foul or fishy smell. Antibiotics are usually prescribed to knock the infection out.

**Q MY CYCLE HAS GOTTEN SHORTER RECENTLY. I'M GETTING A PERIOD EVERY TWO TO THREE WEEKS. WHAT'S GOING ON?**

Hormonal imbalances and anovulation (when a woman doesn't ovulate) can cause irregular cycles. Ovulation problems can be caused by stress, PCOS or pituitary, adrenal or thyroid disorders. If your menstrual cycle is occurring more

## Don't be shy: Bring up period changes with your doctor.

you typically experience bloating or whether you should try the over-the-counter multisymptom menstruation remedy Pamprin, which contains a mild diuretic. If you are taking a birth control pill, you might consider the estrogen-progesterone combo called Yasmin, which targets a range of menstrual symptoms including bloating, cramping and heavy periods. Birth control pills in general may also offer some protection against bloating. If you find that your bloating doesn't disappear after your period, you should alert your ob-gyn because persistent bloating can be a sign of ovarian cancer. Other red flags for this cancer include abdominal pain or pressure, the frequent urge to urinate and irregular bleeding.

**Q SOMETIMES I BLEED AFTER SEX, EVEN WHEN I'M MID-CYCLE. SHOULD I BE WORRIED?**

See your ob-gyn to rule out an infection, which can be a cause of bleeding after intercourse. Top culprits include bacterial vaginosis, trichomoniasis, severe yeast infections, chlamydia and gonorrhea. These infections can lead to pelvic inflammatory disease, the infection and inflammation of pelvic organs such as the cervix, uterus, fallopian tubes and sometimes the ovaries. Other symptoms

often than every 21 days, talk to your doctor, especially if this is a recent change. The good news is that there are ways to bring on regularity. Birth control pills can regulate a menstrual cycle in women not looking to get pregnant. For women who want to have a baby, progesterone can be prescribed, with or without fertility drugs such as Clomid.

**Q WHAT CAN I DO ABOUT VAGINAL ODOR DURING MY PERIOD? I CHECKED WITH MY DOCTOR AND I DON'T HAVE AN INFECTION.**

Make sure you are changing your sanitary pads frequently, since odor starts to develop when menstrual blood is exposed to air. Change your pad every 4 to 6 hours or more often, depending on the amount of bleeding. Forgetting to take out a tampon can also cause a foul vaginal odor and discharge, so change tampons every 4 to 8 hours. And be sure to keep your vaginal area clean with gentle (unscented) soap and water. Since your vagina naturally cleanses itself after each period, there's no need to douche. Regular douching can actually upset the natural acidity of the vagina, leaving you more susceptible to infections. If you do douche, don't do it more than once a month. ■